

Suspended Sentence

Janice Morgan

She Writes Press (Oct 15, 2019)

Softcover \$16.99 (320pp)

978-1-63152-644-2

Suspended Sentence is an insightful memoir about a tense period within a family.

Janice Morgan's forthright memoir *Suspended Sentence* is about tenaciously parenting her adult bipolar son and helping him chart his own course.

When her twenty-three-year-old son, Dylan, was arrested for possessing a stolen firearm, reckless endangerment, and growing marijuana, Morgan, a professor, was angry: "I'd been cast without my permission into a low-budget B movie, a pot boiler." But facing the subsequent turmoil, she learned to become a silent witness instead of trying to fix every problem.

Morgan describes her opposing feelings with intense clarity. Between wanting to plead her son's case and letting him experience his own consequences, she revisits her memories of him. Chapters move between the legal process and Dylan's diversion to drug court; his childhood; and his teenage years, when his challenging behavior escalated and he was finally diagnosed.

The back and forth structure emphasizes the pain of hindsight and illustrates the minutia that comes with addressing mental health and recovery issues, including their financial and emotional tolls. Self-reflections, including acknowledgment that Morgan's fruitful academic career led to family distance, capture rocky periods, while passages about Morgan's mother and her similar struggles with Morgan's alcoholic brother bring home the family's anguished legacy in an empathetic way.

Dylan's different stages coalesce around specific memories, from his falling off of a BMX bike as a child to how he latched onto rap music as an outlet. These early interests suggest his attraction to danger and to a tough self-image, both of which were at odds with his small-town upbringing. His shortcomings, including how he persisted in believing that everyone and everything else was to blame for his troubles, are portrayed in a fair way. Morgan conveys his volatility and his uphill efforts to learn accountability. Some of his struggles, including those to regain his license and buying a car, are repeated too often. Guilt, bewilderment, support, and tentative wishes for Dylan's success fold into Morgan's self-reckoning as she learns how to live in the moment.

The book's extended comparison of *Alice in Wonderland* with its suppositions about what living with bipolar disorder feels like is less grounded than its shared comments from a woman who lives with bipolar. Its chapter on relandscaping a garden is a delicate, beautiful reprieve amid the uncertainty of Dylan's full recovery. The penultimate chapter sums up the book best, pairing Morgan's drive through Cincinnati, where many of Dylan's problems compounded, with her gradual attainment of inner peace.

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KAREN RIGBY (February 28, 2020)

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